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### UM researcher studies Montana's return migrants

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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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Oct. 7, 1999

**Contact:** Christiane von Reichert, Department of Geography, (406) 243-4784.

### **UM RESEARCHER STUDIES MONTANA'S RETURN MIGRANTS**

#### **MISSOULA--**

Die-hard, dyed-in-the-wool Montanans bristle at the notion that many of the state's best and brightest high school and college graduates flee Big Sky Country looking for greener pastures. It's true, however.

But it's also true that some of those who once fled eventually come back, and Christiane von Reichert, an assistant professor of geography at The University of Montana, has been delving into the reasons why.

Von Reichert had been studying Montana's migration data for several years when Jim Sylvester of UM's Bureau of Business and Economic Research invited her join him in examining the bureau's Montana Polls between 1993 and 1997 for migration patterns. They noticed that three out of five households migrating to Montana are returnees. Put another way, in 60 percent of migrant households, at least one household member has lived here previously. In other words, returning households outnumber new migrant households by a wide margin, and out-of-staters aren't overrunning the state in the massive numbers many Montanans fear.

Because interstate return migration in the United States is often considered to be much lower, von Reichert has been looking at causes for Montana's relatively high rate, particularly in the state's fast-growing Missoula, Flathead, Ravalli and Gallatin counties.

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"Return migration is poorly researched and poorly understood by migration researchers," she says. "The data are hard to get. Some past work assumed that people returned because they couldn't integrate elsewhere. The term was they 'failed' elsewhere."

Von Reichert challenges that and argues that people return after making choices. Her pursuit of information about the reasons why people return has taken her to 18 high school reunions in communities throughout the state during the past two summers, beginning with three in Missoula in 1998. During summer 1999, she put 6,000 miles on her truck, traveling as far as Colstrip, Glasgow and Billings and interviewing more than 250 people at 15 reunions. UM's O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West sponsored her summer 1999 research, which she's currently analyzing for a talk she will give at the center on Thursday, Nov. 4.

It was her 1998 pilot project in Missoula, however, that won her the center's support for the past summer. In the 1998 pilot, she interviewed 52 individuals at two Missoula high school reunions -- Sentinel's class of 1978 and Big Sky's class of 1988 -- and one informal gathering of 1973 Hellgate graduates.

Her first order of business was to identify those who have lived in Montana since high school graduation, those who left and still live elsewhere and those who left but later returned.

"After identifying the migrant status, I focused on out-migrants and return migrants and asked why members of the class left," she says. Four out of the 52 she interviewed left the state to pursue an education. The only other reason people left was jobs, writ large. They said their jobs don't exist in Montana or don't pay enough here. Of the 21 out-migrants she talked with, about a third would move back if job opportunities became available, but they weren't hopeful about that.



Concentrating then on the 31 return migrants, von Reichert found only three who returned for employment, two returning to take over the family business.

"The others moved for family, community, the environment or a combination of these factors," she says. "Employment wasn't an issue."

One couple moved back after having lived in Portland, she says. They gave up a large home, a house on the beach and higher income to be closer to family and raise their children in a neighborhood like the one they grew up in. The child care afforded by having family nearby played little if any role in the return of migrants.

Most respondents who stressed community were women, von Reichert says. One male respondent moved back for the more relaxed lifestyle, saying it was a feature of Montana life one can appreciate only after having left it. Outdoor recreation and scenery also brought people back, von Reichert found. "I was homesick for views," one person told her.

All told, von Reichert says, her 1998 findings indicate people who return to Montana aren't failures who couldn't make the grade in the wide world beyond the state line, and she expects her 1999 research to support and broaden those findings.

"People who return to Montana place lifestyle above economic choices," she says. "Their responses show that they value family and community."

Because von Reichert's method of collecting data is less formal than a typical poll, she says her results are more qualitative than quantitative.

"When you go to high school reunions, you don't have a random sample -- or a subset -  
- of the people who graduated," she says. "People who attend their high school reunion are self-selected -- they chose to come." For that reason, she cannot calculate accurately the



proportions of stayers, out-migrants or return migrants among an entire graduating class. She also cannot compare the socioeconomic attributes of the different groups.

“People who live out of state and attend their high school reunion likely enjoy higher incomes since they can afford the trip,” she says. Furthermore, she says, in the face-to-face interview method she used, respondents don’t remain anonymous, don’t enjoy the privacy that comes with a questionnaire. This can lead to invalid responses to questions relating to income, education and occupation. But it also can result in findings impossible to gain through a typical questionnaire.

“The purpose of this work is to listen to people speak in their own voices, using their own words,” she says. “The responses are much richer and more in-depth than what one can get through a survey.”

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